

The Black Death: Bubonic Plague

In the early 1330s an outbreak of deadly bubonic plague occurred in China. The bubonic plague mainly affects rodents, but fleas can transmit the disease to people. Once people are infected, they infect others very rapidly. Plague causes fever and a painful swelling of the lymph glands called buboes, which is how it gets its name. The disease also causes spots on the skin that are red at first and then turn black.

Since China was one of the busiest of the world's trading nations, it was only a matter of time before the outbreak of plague in China spread to western Asia and Europe. In October of 1347, several Italian merchant ships returned from a trip to the Black Sea, one of the key links in trade with China. When the ships docked in Sicily, many of those on board were already dying of plague. Within days the disease spread to the city and the surrounding countryside. An eyewitness tells what happened:

"Realizing what a deadly disaster had come to them, the people quickly drove the Italians from their city. But the disease remained, and soon death was everywhere. Fathers abandoned their sick sons. Lawyers refused to come and make out wills for the dying. Friars and nuns were left to care for the sick, and monasteries and convents were soon deserted, as they were stricken, too. Bodies were left in empty houses, and there was no one to give them a Christian burial."

The disease struck and killed people with terrible speed. The Italian writer Boccaccio said its victims often

"ate lunch with their friends and dinner with their ancestors in paradise."

By the following August, the plague had spread as far north as England, where people called it "The Black Death" because of the black spots it produced on the skin. A terrible killer was loose across Europe, and Medieval medicine had nothing to combat it.



In winter the disease seemed to disappear, but only because fleas--which were now helping to carry it from person to person--are dormant then. Each spring, the plague attacked again, killing new victims. After five years 25 million people were dead--**one-third of Europe's people.**

Even when the worst was over, smaller outbreaks continued, not just for years, but for centuries. The survivors lived in constant fear of the plague's return, and the disease did not disappear until the 1600s.

Medieval society never recovered from the results of the plague. So many people had died that there were serious labor shortages all over Europe. This led workers to demand higher wages, but landlords refused those demands. By the end of the 1300s peasant revolts broke out in England, France, Belgium and Italy.

The disease took its toll on the church as well. People throughout Christendom had prayed devoutly for deliverance from the plague. Why hadn't those prayers been answered? A new period of political turmoil and philosophical questioning lay ahead.

Black Death - Disaster Strikes

25 million people died in just under five years between 1347 and 1352. Estimated population of Europe from 1000 to 1352.

- 1000 38 million
- 1100 48 million
- 1200 59 million
- 1300 70 million
- 1347 75 million
- 1352 50 million

Spreading of the Black Death

Europe, 1348

Hundreds of thousands of people - men, women and children - are dying in every country in Europe, struck down by an epidemic of an apparently incurable plague which the healthy and afflicted alike call the Black Death".

Not since the sixth century has such an epidemic attacked Europe. Spreading from Asia, and carried by rat-fleas via the ports of the Black Sea, the plague takes two forms. Bubonic plague is seen in the swellings, or buboes. That inflate the lymph nodes at the neck, armpit or groin, while the pneumonic" plague affects the lungs, and victims choke on their own blood.

The plague has stunned Europe, and everywhere people are desperate for an explanation. Some blame invisible particles carried in the wind, others talk of poisoned wells. Many inevitably, blame the Jews. Immediate responses differ widely. Some choose to challenge the plague by bouts of riotous living, others seek protection by barring their doors and living as recluses. Neither method has halted the disease. Others have left home, seeking safety in the remote countryside, but often they too have fallen ill. Attempts to bar villages, towns, even whole cities, to sufferers have all failed. The plague moves on.

The outbreak has shattered communities. Families have been set against each other- the well rejecting the sick. Essential services have collapsed; law and order, with so many administrators struck down, barely exist in some areas. A sense of panic pervades Europe and everyone, it appears, is struggling only for his own survival. Properties stand empty, deserted by desperate owners; the sick die alone, for even the most devoted doctors cannot save them: corpses are simply dumped in the street or buried in mass graves. Some depraved creatures, themselves already infected, break into houses and threaten to contaminate all within unless bribed to leave. Agriculture is at a standstill. Crops wither in the fields; cattle wander untended.

Doctors do what they can, but the plague seems irresistible. Even the most expert physicians can do little more than help strengthen people's resolve and build morale.

Some recommend the burning of aromatic woods and herbs; others suggest special diets, courses of bleeding, new postures for sleeping and many other remedies. The very rich are trying medicines made of gold and pearls. The terrible truth is that nothing seems to work. Flight is the best option, and if one cannot fly, then all that remains is resignation and prayer.

Name _____ Due ^{Wed.} ~~Thursday~~ December 20 ¹¹

1. What were the causes of the plague?
2. Approximately what percentage of Europe's population died due to the Plague?
3. What were the physical symptoms of someone stricken with the Plague?
4. How did people react to their illness?
5. How were communities affected by the illness?
6. Pretend you are a newscaster and write a two paragraph synopsis of what you think would be a "typical" script for a news report on the plague.